

# 1 Introduction

## Locating heritage and dialogue in digital culture

*Areti Galani, Gabi Arrigoni, Rhiannon Mason  
and Bethany Rex*

In 2010, Intercult founder Chris Torch, reflecting on the position and role of European museums in a globalised world, and specifically in relation to digital technologies and platforms, made the following points:

The raw material of mutual understanding is accessible in ways never before imagined. But this capacity for increased distribution is not enough to generate true intercultural dialogue. It is the cross-fertilisation between virtual access and face to face encounter which makes museums relevant and useful.

(Torch, 2010)

Since then, significant developments have taken place on the technological, cultural and political front, and a number of European policies and initiatives have focused on the role of intercultural dialogue in Europe (Council of Europe, 2008; European Commission, 2018). Despite the institutional recognition of the role of culture and heritage as tools for dialogue between nations (Anderson, O'Dowd and Wilson, 2003; Innocenti, 2016) and the significant investment in the digitisation of European cultural resources (European Commission, 2012; Valtysson, 2012), work that examines how the areas of European heritage, dialogue and digital culture intersect remains less common.

This *Focus* volume aims to provide a synergistic exploration of the three areas of heritage, dialogue and digital (to include technologies and practices) to highlight two things: (a) the plurality of understandings, terms and definitions of European heritage, dialogue and digital within European heritage institutions; and (b) the discrepancies and tensions that arise in both the conceptualisation and articulation of their interrelationships.

With regard to the former, the volume contributes to the discourse on the 'dialogic museum' by critically reflecting on the lack of common language and understandings in both conceptualising and practically mobilising

dialogue in heritage institutions. It builds on existing research which has already identified a significant diversity in the language around dialogue used by European cultural institutions (Bodo, 2013). Regarding the latter, the volume revisits and problematises some of the commonly circulating assumptions, such as the role of intercultural dialogue relating to heritage to support positive outcomes and the creation of harmonious societies and the inherent capacity of digital technologies to democratise heritage and to create transcultural dialogues. Therefore, it makes clearer the increasing need for other-than-instrumental uses of dialogue, heritage and digital in the context of European identity building.

Furthermore, this *Focus* volume discusses original empirical research that specifically focuses on the intersection between European heritage, dialogic and digital practices. This empirical research has been carried out within European cultural institutions and among online communities that engage with what Leggewie (2010) calls the ‘seven circles of European memory’, such as colonialism, the memory of the First and Second World Wars, the trauma of the Holocaust, transnational immigration and the flagship values of democracy, peace and integration that underpin Europe’s narrative post 1945 (online). Drawing on this research, the volume considers the emergence and role of digitally mediated dialogues around heritage in Europe within two continua: (a) dialogues taking place between institutions and individuals and (b) official and unofficial narratives. The scale and diversity of voices taking part in these dialogues is also explored.

It is not our intention to claim that the topics of European heritage, dialogue and digital technologies and culture have not received scholarly attention; quite the opposite. The individual topics and the individual intersections of these areas of activity have been researched for some time. For instance, the discourse around heritage and digital technologies has been active since the 1990s (Jones-Garmil, 1997; Mintz and Thomas, 1998; Parry, 2007; Cameron and Kenderdine, 2007, among others). This discourse adopted existing frameworks such as Malraux’s ‘museum without walls’ as well as generated new ones, such as the ‘networked’ (Proctor, 2008) and, more recently, the ‘connected museum’ (Drotner and Schröder, 2013) to vividly describe the new and emerging nature of cultural institutions in digital culture. In these conceptualisations, the notion of dialogue is both implicitly and explicitly explored, and digital platforms and tools are identified as having the capacity to open opportunities for institutions to have a dialogic relationship with existing and new audiences, within and beyond their physical boundaries.

Indeed, networked communication practices have had a profound impact on cultural as well as civic behaviours, affecting the scale and quality of exchange between individuals, as well as between individuals and organisations across geographical and, as media theorists argue, cultural boundaries:

Global turmoil prompts citizens to learn more about each other, and digital media fuel intercultural communication on a scale and of a kind that is a significant departure from the mass-mediated contacts of the last several centuries.

(Smith Pfister and Soliz, 2011, p. 246)

The contributions to this volume specifically focus on the question whether the dialogic potential of digital technologies, outlined by media theorists and digital heritage researchers, is also materialised (or not) in heritage practice and how European policy encourages (or not) a dialogic focus within digital heritage work. Do specific institutional and policy conditions as well as different conceptualisations of dialogue and digital technologies among heritage professionals and stakeholders enable or encumber the dialogic potential of digital technologies in the context of European heritage?

The connection between heritage institutions and dialogue has also received significant attention since the 1980s alongside the advancement of theories such as ‘new museology’ (Vergo, 1989), which argued for a greater connection between cultural institutions and their audiences. An influential text in this discourse is John Kuo Wei Tchen’s (1992) account of the *Chinatown History Museum Experiment* in New York, which sought to engage with communities connected to New York’s Chinatown to ‘mutually explor[e] the memory and meaning of Chinatown’s past’ in order to improve ‘the planning and development of the organisation’ (p. 291). Furthermore, the idea of dialogue has received renewed attention in institutional heritage practice in connection to the notion of the ‘participatory museum’ (e.g. Simon, 2010; Adair, Filene and Koloski, 2011). However, Tchen’s writing is particularly relevant to the preoccupation of this volume with the relationship between dialogue and alterity, because it specifically alerts us to the fact that any dialogue between institutions and communities should necessarily recognise that communities themselves are multicultural, internally diverse and fluid, emerging through continuous interactions between people and places.

In the European context, the relationship between cultural institutions and their communities has also been pursued under the auspices of intercultural dialogue, and the policies, research and practice associated with it. Intercultural dialogue presumes that museums and cultural institutions become ‘space[s] for negotiation’ that should also ‘question the social segmentation resulting from multicultural policies, in which the recognition of cultural diversity and distinct identities often ends up reinforcing discrimination and segregation’ (Delgado, 2009, p. 8). Furthermore, Harrison (2013) urges us to consider heritage as inherently ‘dialogical’ as a means to acknowledging that all heritage emerges through negotiation between

human and non-human actors and, as such, it should aim to engage with contemporary economic, environmental, political and social concerns too.

One might argue that such texts aim to encourage us to think purposefully and analytically about heritage institutions and their possibilities. This proposition seems particularly important given the current political and social context within which heritage institutions in Europe are operating. However, the future-oriented, transformative tone of these ideas make a challenging reading as they propose dialogue and digital as drivers that enable heritage practice to attend to slogans such as ‘valuing diversity’ (UK government), ‘unity in diversity’ (European Commission) and ‘we transform the world with culture!’ (*Europeana*) and their accompanying policy statements. This is more so in the light of recent retreats away from internationalism made most visible by the recent Brexit vote in the UK (in 2016) and the rise of right-wing and populist politics across Europe and across the Atlantic. Addressing propositions for a digitally mediated ‘dialogic heritage’ in such contexts where alterity is not readily considered in a celebratory mode exposes the real-world stakes in this discussion. At stake here is the possibility for heritage institutions to not only *commit to*, but regarding the case-study institutions which this volume examines, to *design for* dialogic practice within their actual spaces and alongside existing digital platforms, such as social media sharing platforms and Twitter. This volume, therefore, asks the question of what the possibilities for dialogue and dialogic heritage practice might be, both in the European context and in relation to established and emerging digital practices in an expanding and diverse digital public sphere.

Building on the significant corpus of research briefly outlined earlier, this *Focus* volume is intended as a particular ‘snapshot’ in time, which allows us to discuss and reflect upon the practices that take place in the intersections of heritage, dialogue and digital transformations in the context of Europe. It is not intended as a comprehensive exploration of the terms ‘European heritage’, ‘digital technologies’, ‘digital culture’ and ‘dialogue’ and all their ramifications. In this respect, we recognise and fully acknowledge that these are not only vast topics in their own right but they are also non-fixed entities; rather, to borrow from José van Dijck (2012, p. 5), they evolve alongside the social practices that compose them.

The volume, therefore, articulates a particular interest in digitally mediated dialogic heritage *practices*, that is, how ideas, beliefs or methods about heritage, dialogue and digital are brought together through their application and mobilisation in the context of European heritage institutions and their publics. By putting an emphasis on practice, we wish to acknowledge its capacity to illustrate, embody and contradict both theoretical ideas and policy imperatives in the nexus of European heritage, dialogue and digital

culture. We are inspired in this decision by Keller's (2011) observation that 'a theory of life as dialogic can lead us to ignore the actual experience of an everyday life that frequently seems obsessively bound instead to the monologic' (p. 30). We also align with a prevalent recent emphasis among heritage scholars on the significance of attending to practice in approaching topics such as heritage narratives (Smith, 2011), memory and heritage in Europe (Macdonald, 2013) and affect in relation to heritage (Wetherell, 2012). To summarise using Reckwitz's (2002) words: 'a practice is thus a routinised way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood' (p. 250). In this respect, all practices are by nature social practices. This also applies to digital practices, which Jones, Chik and Hafner (2015) describe as "assemblages" of actions involving tools associated with digital technologies, which have come to be recognised by specific groups of people as ways of attaining particular social goals, enacting particular social identities, and reproducing particular sets of social relationships' (p. 3). The emphasis on museum practices is present in this volume through Chapters 3, 4 and 5 as well as through the three 'artefact vignettes' that further provide insights into design practices in this context.

In Chapter 2 of this volume Galani, Markham and Mason revisit individual European policies on cultural heritage, intercultural dialogue and digital technologies for heritage to identify points of conversion and diversion on how dialogue is understood and to reflect on key tensions arising from these policies, such as the role of intercultural dialogue and access to heritage resources to support harmonious societies in the context of digital public sphere. Subsequently, the volume presents three *loci* in which digitally mediated dialogues around heritage are explored in relation to museological and heritage practices. Arrigoni and Galani (Chapter 3) draw on interviews with museum professionals and display analysis in ten European museums to discuss how *institutions* approach the role of digital technologies to support dialogue as part of their institutional philosophy and how this is manifested in their exhibition spaces. Stuedahl *et al.* (Chapter 4) reflect on digital co-creation practices between curators in the Norwegian Museum of Science and Technology in Oslo and a *group of multicultural youth* to discuss the dialogic affordances of creating a public-facing digital participatory exhibit; Farrell-Banks (Chapter 5) explores the nature of Twitter as a platform for digitally mediated dialogues around European heritage by examining the use of *Magna Carta* by right-wing populist groups and their online local/global audiences alongside the mobilisation of the same heritage by heritage institutions in the UK.

Each of these chapters is followed by an 'artefact vignette' that introduces a speculative digital artefact which addresses the key themes of the chapter.

These artefacts were created as part of the EU-funded CoHERE project using a research-through-design approach and were deployed in festival, workshop and living lab contexts in European cities in 2017–2018. The three vignettes aim to introduce a dialogic element in the overall structure of the volume. All three vignettes together are also proposed as a mini-portfolio, a triptych, of design experimentation to advocate the role of critical, playful digital design in the context of heritage and dialogic practices *at large*, a topic we come back to in the concluding chapter of this volume.

The volume concludes with a chapter by Galani, Mason and Rex (Chapter 6) that reflects on the critical issues and the juxtapositions emerging from the three *loci* of practice explored in Chapters 3, 4 and 5. It observes that two epistemological approaches emerge through the analysis: *dialogue-as-purpose* and *dialogue-as-purposive*. It further proposes that heritage organisations in the networked digital public sphere are well suited to engage with *dialogue as reflexive action* and *dialogue as purposeful listening*. While acknowledging and elaborating on the limitations of dialogue, the concluding chapter also articulates ways forward for digitally mediated dialogic practices in European heritage, through *the adoption of design methods*, the development of *hybrid, techno-social literacies* and the *linking up of relevant policies and strategies* that underpin the tripartite relationship between European heritage, dialogue and digital culture.

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